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“The disarmed community: Towards a peace ecclesiology in the light of L’Arche”

jason reimer greig

Abstract: While the call towards “inclusion” opens the way for many persons with sensory impairments, often persons considered intellectually disabled remain left behind within the dominant theories of social inclusion. This lacuna also exists within ecclesial attempts to offer a place for these persons within the church. The ecumenical communities of L’Arche offer a way “beyond inclusion” that not only sees these persons as “core members” of the ecclesial body, but as also often gifted with the dispositions needed for witnessing to Christ’s peace in the world. The history of L’Arche and the writings of Jean Vanier, the movement’s founder, point to a mission given to L’Arche to be and become communities of peace. Vanier’s theology of peace includes a robust sense of peace not only as the absence of conflict, but, more importantly, as an eschatological goal and a dynamic action. Through living in community with vulnerable persons, members of L’Arche acknowledge their own woundedness which makes enemies of the other and builds walls of protection from the stranger. Life in communities dedicated to Vanier’s theological vision trains persons in the habits and practices which make for peace. A crucial element of this morality is the conception and experience of time. In communities attempting to live out Vanier’s vision, time exists as a gift given by God for reconciling with God, self, other, and creation, and for witnessing to that peace to the world. This view of peacemaking acts as a potential source for the church’s peace witness, and coheres with a vision of the church as the community called by the Trinity to show the world a way beyond violence and enmity. The church cultivates and demonstrates this vocation through training its members in the habits of mutuality, trust, patience and tenderness, received through the ecclesial practices of hospitality, story-telling, prayer, forgiveness and celebration.